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Abstract

In his perceptive work on the interrelationship between history and literature, Louis Montrose advocates a resituation of texts within their contexts, which leads to "a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history" (20). For Montrose, aesthetic works can historicize the past and provide an understanding and explanation of times past, but they cannot provide an objective portrayal of history (20).¹ It is in this spirit that I would like to approach Lope's Fuenteovejuna (1610-1614). To resituate Lope's renowned drama within its socio-historical context is to make possible a more profound understanding of the various contemporary pressures that inform its plot.

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THE POLITICS OF AGRICULTURE: DRAMATIZING AGRARIAN PLIGHT IN LOPE'S *FUENTE OVEJUNA*

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For Robert L. Fiore, tireless mentor and friend

In his perceptive work on the interrelationship between history and literature, Louis Montrose advocates a resituation of texts within their contexts, which leads to “a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history” (20). For Montrose, aesthetic works can historicize the past and provide an understanding and explanation of times past, but they cannot provide an objective portrayal of history (20).¹ It is in this spirit that I would like to approach Lope’s *Fuenteovejuna* (1610-1614). To resituate Lope’s renowned drama within its socio-historical context is to make possible a more profound understanding of the various contemporary pressures that inform its plot. One such prominent focus in the play is related to issues of agrarian policy and reform that were chief concerns during Lope’s lifetime. Indeed, crop production and storage, depopulation and famine, in addition to other agrarian troubles of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, are all included in the play in various references. The question is, then, what role do these socio-economic agrarian topics play in a work about a 1476 village revolt that culminated in the tumultuous overthrow and violent murder of the town Comendador, Fernán Gómez de Guzmán? It is my contention that the

Comendador's murder simultaneously provided an intertextual resolution for agrarian hardship in the play and, extratextually, a symbolic response to agrarian problems prevalent in early seventeenth-century Spain, the time in which the work was written.

Lope may have relied on the supposedly accurate *crónica* accounts for material about the 1476 collective revolt, but he essentially used only those historical reports as a backdrop.² By this I mean to say that examinations of other important subtexts to this drama reveal that Lope was much more concerned with issues of early seventeenth-century Spain than with the fifteenth century. We could even say that a resituation of *Fuenteovejuna* shows that Lope's drama faithfully represents the social values and political and philosophical ideologies of his own epoch, more so than the supposed time of dramatic action.³ As Blue has stated, history and historical accounts such as the *crónicas* that depict the events in *Fuenteovejuna* only provided Lope a setting in which to develop important matters characteristic of his own time, showing that the play has clear political implications, starting with Lope's sources and choice of thematic material (296).⁴ In this way, history and aesthetics maintain a fragile relationship. Indeed, in *The Political Unconscious*, Frederic Jameson writes that aesthetic works that draw on previous historical accounts (such as Lope's *Fuenteovejuna*) can be studied as a symbolic reconstruction of those previous historical situations: "The type of interpretation here proposed is more satisfactorily grasped as the rewriting of the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological subtext, it being always understood that the 'subtext' is not immediately present as such" (81). In *Fuenteovejuna*, the prior historical or ideological subtext to which Jameson speaks can be said to be related to agrarian topics. Citations dealing with shepherding, famine and malnutrition, depopulation, grain storage, and land pillaging help ground the play and ought not to be ignored. And since it is a common practice to seek out the relationship between socio-political backgrounds and the work that depicts them, references to agrarian issues are extremely pertinent in light of the known economic conditions during the time that Lope composed his drama. This is so much the case that seventeenth-century audiences would have likely understood the significance of these agrarian references, perhaps indicating why Lope included them. In *Fuenteovejuna*, the Comendador is seen as the cause of many agrarian problems, and his assassination at the

end offers what Jameson might call an “imaginary or formal solution(s) to unresolvable social contradictions” (79). In short, I maintain that the poor state of agriculture in early seventeenth-century Spain is one “prior historical or ideological subtext” for Lope’s play that is symbolically resolved via the Comendador’s death in the play. *Fuenteovejuna* is, therefore, an aesthetic reproduction of politics and economics and can be studied as a “symbolic act”—following Jameson’s terms (76)—precisely because the play *symbolically* represents and offers solutions for the agrarian conditions of Lope’s time, not the time depicted in the play.⁵

So, where is this agrarian subtext most obvious and pertinent? We could easily start with the village’s name and title of the play, which reflect the profession of shepherding—*Fuenteovejuna*, roughly translated in English as *Sheep’s Fount*. However, references throughout show that the *fuenteovejunos*’ primary vocation was farming. Even the Comendador declares that the townsfolk are more skilled in working the land than fighting: “[...] hay gente [...] no enseñada en escuadrones, / sino en campos y labranzas” (162-65), and Mengo refers to the villagers as “simples labradores” (1705).⁶ Nonetheless, we cannot ignore the profession of shepherding, which impacted so profoundly the state of agriculture during the period. In Golden Age Spain, the enormous success of the merino wool trade led to conflicts with farmers who believed that migratory flocks destroyed productive farmlands that were deemed indispensable for food production. Shepherders responded by forming the *Consejo de la Mesta*, a powerful guild set up to protect its own rights to land use. The *Consejo* acquired incomparable political, legal, and economic advantages over farmers and independent shepherders not associated with the powerful guild. The *Consejo*’s success was notable since the dominance of the wool trade in the peninsula throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries negatively affected the entire country. There was a shortage of agricultural lands to feed a growing population, and adverse weather conditions and drought meant that Spain would suffer food shortages, which, in turn, produced widespread depopulation in the countryside as laborers moved to the cities in search of work.

These historical conflicts are dramatized in *Fuenteovejuna*. A first illustration of the importance of agrarian policy occurs when the mayor Esteban describes the devastating effects of the *tasa del trigo*, a price support established by the Spanish Crown to prop up declining farm earnings. The *tasa* allowed for a maximum ceiling price to be charged for all

grain, but, as was the case with many legislative agrarian reforms, it was instituted mainly to assist large landholders even though small farmers made up the vast majority. In the play, Esteban blames government officials for establishing unjust price supports like the *tasa* that were damaging to farmers:

Ellos en [el] sembrar nos ponen tasa:
daca el trigo, cebada y las legumbres,
calabaças, pepinos y mostazas...
¡Ellos son, a la fe, las calabaças! (880-83)

Worse yet, as Esteban notes, the *tasa* was imposed not only during the harvest, it was equally onerous during planting, “el sembrar,” which further crippled already poor farmers.

Because of the *tasa*, farmers could not charge more for their goods, and, unable to cover their debts, they often defaulted on loans and lost their properties. Juan Rojo explains that the declining worth of his land coupled with poor crop yields will ultimately affect the value of the dowry that a father can provide to his daughter upon her marriage: “No hay cuatro haziendas para un dote, / si es que las vistas han de ser al uso” (931-32).⁷ Scenes like this one probably reflected village nuptials throughout Spain, and Juan Rojo’s comments show that agrarian problems were so dire that they were an important subject of debate. The audience would likely have understood their significance as well.

In addition to the *tasa* tax, poor harvests, draughts, epidemics, and even greater losses of arable land to the *Consejo de la Mesta* led to major depopulation in rural farming communities, as laborers moved to the larger cities in search of work. The abandonment of the countryside in Golden Age Spain led to higher urban populations—and unemployment—and since the farming industry had no skilled labor, the nation’s crop production further declined, thus inciting a vicious cycle. The ensuing migration to urban centers spurred an almost mythic response from writers of the period such as Lope, who recognized Spain’s agricultural troubles. Díez Borque notes that to combat depopulation of rural areas writers exhibited an attitude that represented “un topos literario: menosprecio de corte y alabanza de aldea, que ocasionará una idealización de la vida del campo” (311). Literary works like *Fuenteovejuna* thus became a means to glorify, and even idealize, the value and necessity of rural agrar-

ian life in the midst of a significant desertion of farmlands by laborers. The play deals with these issues and attempts to show that rustic life is better since it is free of the excesses of the court and its hypocritical nature. In the play, the Comendador explains that city life is conducive to his excessive desires and hence represents the immoderation of the Court:

¡Qué cansado villanaje!
¡Ah! Bien hayan las ciudades
que a hombres de calidades
no hay quien sus gustos ataje. (999-1002)

Men of "quality" like the Comendador are meant to be associated with the concept of "menosprecio de la corte," and the glorification of the simple way of life is represented by the villagers. Through a stark comparison of the immoral Comendador and the idealized villagers, Lope seems to be saying that a return to rural lands is one solution to the disastrous state of agriculture in the peninsula, again signaling an agrarian subtext that pervades the work.

Another aspect of the agrarian subtext in *Fuenteovejuna* includes harvest failures that created widespread famine and malnutrition during Lope's time. These crises are reflected in references to food and provisions. A noteworthy example occurs early in Act 1 when Laurencia describes her ideal breakfast and lunch to Pascuala. Totalling twenty-five verses (215-40), Laurencia's prolonged list begins with "un pedazo de lunada," the leg of a hog, accompanied by "zalacatón," a piece of fine bread, and "un vaso de pegado cangilón," some wine (218-24). Certainly, this would be an improbable breakfast given the difficult agricultural situation referenced in the play. Surprisingly, lunch is even more sumptuous and consists of "[...] la vaca entre las coles, / haziendo mil caracoles / con espumosa armonía [...]" (225-28). Here, Laurencia craves a simmering beef stew, yet given the poor economic conditions, it was unlikely that she would eat more than one meal a day let alone two. Nonetheless, her third meal before going to bed would be a "pasatarde" composed of grapes from her own vineyard:

[...] y después un pasatarde,
mientras la cena se aliña,
de una cuerda de mi viña,

que Dios de pedrisco guarde;
y cenar un salpicón
con su aceite y pimienta,
y irme a la cama contenta [...]. (233-39)

The *pasatarde* description indicates an interest in rare foods that no doubt were not necessary for daily survival. It can be said that Laurencia's idealized portrayal is really based on scarcity, since these products were not available to the peasant. Curiously, though, in an epoch in which literature deliberately praised the virtues of rural life, its honesty, simplicity, and peaceful existence, Laurencia idealizes food. It becomes clear that hunger and survival in Golden Age Spain were so significant that Laurencia's thoughts are easily directed to mealtimes, almost forgetting the Comendador's unscrupulous proposals to her.

While seeming to be irrelevant to the overall argument of the play, examined in light of the agrarian conditions during Lope's time, Laurencia's preoccupation with food provides an interesting and significant perspective on agrarian hardship. This adversity is also reflected in a variety of references to grain stockpiles and storage units. Fuenteovejuna's survival—like that of many towns in early seventeenth-century Spain—depended on important decisions regarding grain conservation, and the best answer was a system of granaries or *pósitos*. At the beginning of Act 2, Esteban declares that the town must plan to store grain in order to survive the upcoming harsh winter weather:

Assí tenga salud, como parece,
que no se saque más agora el pósito.
El año apunta mal, y el tiempo crece,
y es mejor que el sustento esté en depósito,
aunque lo contradizen más de treze. (860-64)

As Esteban points out, the immediate explanation for concern is the upcoming harsh weather: "el año apunta mal, y el tiempo crece." For the mayor and his counterpart, the Regidor, the obvious answer to the dilemma is to safeguard the already diminished granary, conserving these valuable resources for later use even though others may not agree with the decision. Indeed, this use of the plural "contradizen" could be interpreted as government officials or others who attempted to control the affairs of

smaller farming communities during Lope's time. The scene probably resonated with the seventeenth-century audience because the need for grain silos might have reminded them of similar hardships that they themselves endured.⁸

As mayor, Esteban will have to plea with the Comendador to agree to conserve precious grains: "Hagamos dello a Fernán Gómez súplica" (867). Esteban performs this duty even though the Comendador is not obliged to heed anyone's advice, thus indicating that the overlord wields significant power over the town and its inhabitants. And Esteban is critical of this obligation, noting that the Comendador, who should be the most informed about topics concerning grain storage, is really the most ignorant: "Y pidiendo el presente lo importante, / al más sabio veréis más ignorante" (874-75). Esteban's words demonstrate the difficulty involved in making decisions about the welfare of the farming community and also serve as a criticism of the Comendador's irresponsibility. It quickly becomes clear that his apathy and unresponsiveness to such weighty issues will greatly contribute to the town's uprising.

Esteban's reference to the "pósito" is not the only allusion to grain storage that appears in the play. In fact, there are two others. In a bet between Frondoso, Mengo, and Barrildo as to whether love exists, Mengo puts up as collateral his musical instrument, which he believes to be as valuable as a granary: "Daré mi rabel de box, / que vale más que una trox, / porque yo le estimo en más" (286-88).⁹ Although this seems to be a passing reference, Lope could easily have chosen another word to rhyme with "box," but I believe his motivations for using "trox" were deliberate. This is especially true since the term "trox" appears in a conversation between Laurencia and Frondoso. Laurencia has been concerned about town gossip and asserts that the villagers should be more concerned about serious matters such as their empty "troxes":

Y mejor sus troxes vean
de rubio trigo en agosto
atestadas y colmadas
y sus tinajas de mosto,
que tal imaginación
me ha llegado a dar enojo. (743-48)

We know that grain storage was vital to everyday survival in seventeenth-

century Spain. We can also see that Lope was concerned enough about agrarian issues to mention the granaries in his play, references that strategically contribute to the agrarian subtext that grounds the drama.

Other issues related to the agrarian subtext include the robbery of community grain and the theft of village farms, acts by the Comendador's soldiers that ultimately lead to the town rebellion and his murder. The ongoing war between the Portuguese and Spanish Crowns serves as the historical backdrop. When the Comendador decides to attack Ciudad Real in the name of Alfonso of Portugal, the victory ultimately provides him and his men the opportunity to steal supplies, ransack farmlands, and pilage livestock. Flores, the Comendador's servant, describes the exploitation of the villagers and the robbery of their *haciendas*:

Al Comendador y a todos
ha hecho tantas mercedes,
que el saco de la ciudad
el de su hazienda parece. (506-24)

Flores's account of the destruction and all-out robbery of the village *haciendas* indicates that the soldiers show little regard for the poor farmers. As with most military missions during this period, when the army was successful in battle, the defeated village was sacked; when it was defeated, its home village was ravaged.

Besides his outright violence and robbery of farmlands, the Comendador had other means of enriching himself. Upon returning victorious from Ciudad Real, he and his men expect the *fuateovejuneros* to reward them for their efforts. Given Esteban's remarks on the weather and the necessity of stockpiling grain, it seems unlikely that the villagers would have food to spare, let alone enough to "reward" the soldiers. Ironically, the coerced offerings include items that are of little value to the Comendador, such as an entire flock of geese and some polished ceramic earthenware:

[...] Lo primero
traen dos cestas de polidos barros;
de gansos viene un ganadillo entero,
que sacan por las redes las cabeças,
para cantar vuesdayo valor guerrero. (555-59)

The first gifts serve as symbolic and veiled insults of the Comendador and his men, since the geese have no value outside their obvious material worth—i.e., they are not celebratory in any way.¹⁰ This is also true with the remaining tributes. For example, such items as “diez cebones en sal” and “cien pares de capones y gallinas” could be meant as an insult, since these chickens were castrated while young; their castration is meant to epitomize the Comendador and his men, who symbolically lack the virility of a rooster and are really nothing more than “gallinas.” Regardless, despite their poor economic conditions, the villagers are compelled to surrender their valuables or lose them by force. Esteban explicitly labels the gifts “justo pecho,” which would be understood by seventeenth-century audiences as a type of coercion or tribute not freely given:

De quesos y otras cosas no excusadas
no quiero daros cuenta: justo pecho
de voluntades que tenéis ganadas;
y a vos y a vuestra casa, ¡buen provecho! (575-78)

“Justo pecho” is an expected tribute paid to the village lord, or, according to Covarrubias, “vale cierto tributo que se da al rey” (858). The tribute “pays honor” and has a monetary meaning, even though in this case, the “tribute” is required as payment for military assistance for the townsfolk—services not requested, or required. It is interesting that the villagers’ tribute to the Comendador centers on agricultural products that they could least afford to give as gifts. Moreover, the coerced tributes and difficult economic situation contributes to their overall disgust for the Comendador. As these scenes demonstrate, there is a noticeable fixation on food and provisions that brings to light the underlying problems of daily agricultural life.

The violent acts visited upon the *fuateovejuneros*, in addition to the requirement to “pay tribute” to the Comendador, are the proverbial last straw. The townsfolk meet and discuss what action must be taken against the Comendador. Juan Rojo is the first to declare that the villagers must rise up and put an end to the larceny of their crops and vineyards when he states:

Si nuestras desventuras se compassan
para perder las vidas, ¿qué aguardamos?

Las casas y las viñas nos abrasan;
tiranos son. ¡A la vengança vamos! (1708-11)

Rojo clearly states that the townsfolk have greatly suffered through various exploitations and robberies of their farmlands. He furthermore believes that these dreadful abuses serve as a valid reason to rebel, even though the Comendador, as village *encomendero* or overlord, has the legal rights to their property. As is common throughout the play, however, instead of protecting the villagers, the Comendador has abused his power and position as *encomendero* and jeopardized the welfare of the town. His theft of village grain and the destruction of farms, in addition to his poor agrarian decisions, are duly noted throughout the work.

It should be remembered that, generally, the *encomendero* of small towns like Fuenteovejuna was responsible for the *encomienda*'s crop production and the overall administration of lands, even collecting proceeds from the farmland he controlled. It was in the interest of the *encomendero*, then, to have profitable farms, since he would therefore enrich himself. While income from the *encomienda* was meant to strengthen the *encomendero*'s position, in *Fuenteovejuna* the Comendador uses his status as *encomendero* to raise armies, gain political favor, compensate loyalists, and even take over lands privately owned by some peasants. The Comendador's actions, coupled with his poor fiscal and agrarian policies, have already put the village at risk and help fuel the civil unrest that filters throughout the town. Lope's popular rebellion culminates with the Comendador's murder, just as in the *crónica* accounts. His death at the hands of an angry mob is especially poetic, since, as we can imagine, that collective horde was comprised mostly of farmers who were engrossed in protecting their livelihood.

Thus, the dire agrarian situation referred to throughout the play becomes an important reason for the upheaval. Indeed, in his rather short defense of the town before the king and queen, Esteban explains how the Comendador pillaged town farmlands, or *haciendas*: "Las haziendas nos robaba / y las donzellas forçaba, / siendo de piedad extraño" (2399-401). What is also important in Esteban's defense is his inclusion of the destruction and theft of village lands—of the laborers' livelihood—, which also serves as a meaningful explanation for the town violence.

By now it should be somewhat apparent that among the various themes

that inform the plot of *Fuenteovejuna*, one important ideological and historical subtext is directly related to agriculture, its use and abuse. These issues were evidently relevant enough to Lope's own life to be included in the play in various forms. Indeed, resituating the play within the sensibility of 1610-1614 Spain shows that the play amply deals with many of the aspects that contributed to the overall strife known to exist in Lope's time, not the time of dramatic action. They include references to food and famine, to a system of granaries, and allusions to the Comendador's pillage of village farmlands, all of which significantly contributed to the villagers' overall hatred for their overlord. One could even say that these agrarian problems could only be resolved by eliminating their cause, the Comendador. Therefore, the village revolt that culminated with the Comendador's murder offers a resolution for agrarian hardship in the play and, as I have maintained, a symbolic solution to agrarian problems of Lope's time, thereby demonstrating that the boundaries between history and aesthetics may be unclear, but Lope used that ambiguity to his advantage.¹¹

NOTES

1. Stephen Greenblatt makes a similar point in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. He believes that if we would not "drift back toward a conception of art as addressed to a timeless, cultureless, universal human existence," we could maintain the connection between literature and society (4).

2. Drawing on historical chronicles for the topic of his play, Lope based his work on Rades y Andrada's account in the *Crónica de las tres Órdenes y Caballerías* (1572) and Alfonso de Palencia's version in the *Crónica de Enrique IV* (1477), both of which provided the foundation for his aesthetic and ideological treatment of the rebellion and murder of the Comendador.

3. Critics such as Greenblatt argue that reconstruction and resituation facilitate a more full recovery of meaning: "The world is full of texts, most of which are virtually incomprehensible when they are removed from their immediate surroundings. To recover the meaning of such texts, to make any sense of them at all, we need to reconstruct the situation in which they were produced" ("Culture" 227).

4. Blue believes that the subtle political statements included in *Fuenteovejuna* were intended for his early seventeenth-century audience: "If Lope is not writing a historically faithful, archeological piece about events in the fifteenth century, he must be sending decipherable messages to his contemporary audience. The first message says what a good play should be: entertaining, well-constructed, captivating, serious and humorous. [...] But the political statements are there as well, hidden, subtle, but

there" (310-11).

5. This notion of a symbolic act can be carried further to show how the agrarian dilemmas included in the play are also symbolic of the situation throughout Spain during Lope's time, as Kirschner has pointed out: "[...] los acontecimientos locales de *Fuenteovejuna* adquieren un valor simbólico y pasan a ser el complemento y el reflejo del proceso histórico de unidad que envolvía a toda España" (83).

6. All citations refer to the edition of Juan María Marín. Verse numbers appear in parenthesis.

7. According to Covarrubias, "las vistas" refers to marriage: "ir a vistas es propio de los que tratan casamiento, para que el uno se satisfaga el otro" (772).

8. Salomon has indicated that grain silos were of the utmost importance for Lope's seventeenth-century audience, the proof of which can be found in historical writings of the period: "[...] en efecto, no hay sino recorrer las *Actas de Cortes* o los trabajos de economistas de la época para descubrir la importancia de dichos silos en relación con las preocupaciones siempre repetidas, que provocaba la escasez de cereales" (262).

9. According to Covarrubias, a "trox" is "lo mesmo que el granero, do se recoge el trigo o cevada" (891).

10. As Kirschner has pointed out, "gansos" that supposedly "cantar vuesso valor guerrero," (v. 559) are actually symbols of bad poets (97), probably meant to insult the Comendador, who is a terrible leader.

11. I wish to express my gratitude to Robert L. Fiore and Julia Domínguez Castellano for their willingness to read an earlier draft of this study and offer insightful comments and suggestions for its improvement.

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